Getting on with it brings rewards

CHRIS Lawton, Managing Director of Oakleigh Engineering summed it up in one sentence: “We are one of the quiet little businesses just getting on with things."

Yet it is this approach of “just getting on with things” that has helped make the Burntwood-based firm a Midlands success story.

Chris Lawton said: "Much has been said about the demise of metal bashing, and you can see why with the number of job losses there have been in the industry. Times are difficult but firms still have a future if they can spread their bets."

Oakleigh Engineering, which was originally set up in 2002, has done just that. It uses machinery that can cut steel to 6mm thick and other metals for a range of one-off designs.

From general fabrication and welding, supplying pipework to the dairy and cereal industries and providing building maintenance, it has moved into architecture that includes installing steel balconies – working for major housebuilders such as Kingsoak – and with the help of SUHNER has added polishing to its range of in-house expertise, rather than use independent companies.

“We studied the implications and concluded it was the right thing to do and it has opened up new markets for us. Around 10% of our business comes from the architectural sector and we believe that we will see a real growth curve for this work because of the quality of finishing that we are now able to offer,” said Chris.

‘We make the goal of quality a priority’

Stainless steel has traditionally been a very difficult material to finish to a high quality. The emergence of tools such as the UTC 7-R electric tube finisher as a serious production technique has proved invaluable in helping Oakleigh Engineering win orders from customers such as BT.

Within a very tight timescale, 70 metres of stainless steel handrails to an external disability ramp were supplied to BT’s offices in Birmingham. Some 150 welds all required hand polishing to a machine finish but it was also the customer’s wish that turned a desire for a smooth, warm to the touch finish into a manual task.

SUHNER’s in-depth understanding of the finishing process encouraged the engineering firm to consider using a wrap around tool rather than sub-contract the finishing requirements.

New orders like this are good news for the company's 10-strong workforce said Chris Lawton adding: "We supply to more than 10 different clients and are continuing to invest in our business.

"Many of our customers view quality as their primary concern. I’ve been in the engineering industry for 25 years and spent six years as a TIG welder in the petrochemical industry. I’m no stranger to change. I’m extremely optimistic about the future despite all the prevailing doom and gloom.

"We have a high staff retention and a lot of it is down to our approach to business. We believe that our staff share our values and are proud of the quality of their work.”



STAFF MATTER …“without their support we would not be as successful as we are," says Chris Lawton, pictured right.

Bend it, shape it

THE SUHNER UTC 7-R electric hand tool is an amazingly simple tool to use for polishing and finishing stainless steel tube.

Tube polishing is difficult as it can be easy to create flat spots. By polishing around the tube with a continuous belt, this issue is overcome.

The UTC 7-R wraps around tube up to 48mm diameter and uses a range of SUHNER belts for grinding, blending and mirror polishing.

Weighing only 2.4kg, UTC 7-R has variable speed from 3,000 to 7,000 rpm; its big brother UTG 9R weighs 3kg, has a 1,050W motor, digitally controlled variable speed from 4,000 to 9,000 rpm and wraps around tube diameters up to 71mm. SUHNER stock a range of zirconia, non-woven and pyramid structured belts to suit this round tube.

Says SUHNER (UK) manager Andi Mumford: “Fabricators have no excuses for supplying shoddy finishing. These tube polishers can dramatically reduce the number of steps and therefore time, in blending and polishing round tube.”



BELTER OF A JOB …Trevor Jones at work with the UTC 7-R